

# Dealing with Stress

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## Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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**Are you feeling stressed?** There is no way you can eliminate stress from your life, and that can be both good and bad. Stress can create interest and add zest to life, or it may be a helpful motivator, convincing you to make positive life changes. Continued high levels of stress, however, can create harmful physical, emotional and mental problems.

### Symptoms of Stress

- Headaches, backaches, neck tension
- Fatigue
- Anxiety, irritability
- Forgetfulness
- Crying
- Eating, drinking, smoking more
- Flu-like symptoms
- Depression
- Skin Eruptions
- Diarrhea
- Elevated blood pressure
- Sleep disturbances
- Overreacting to situations and people
- Accidents

### Causes of Stress

- Overwork
- Unreasonable expectations of others
- Guilt – unreasonable expectations of ourselves
- Overspending
- Unexpected traumatic incidents
- Overeating, excessive drinking
- Over stimulation
- Life changes
  - Death, divorce, moving,
  - children born or leaving
- Job or schedule change
- Health changes/concerns
- Lack of sleep

### EAP Mission

The Washington State Employee Assistance Program supports the well-being of state employees to promote a resilient and productive work environment.

### Stress-Busters that Work

*Accept the things you cannot change and change the things you can.* For example, you cannot change the way another person drives, but you can change the way you react to rude or incompetent drivers.

*Leave your worries on the doorstep.* Put the worries of the workday into an imaginary box and consciously make the decision to leave them outside before you enter your home.

*Breathe deeply.* Inhale deeply through your nose. Hold for a moment. Slowly exhale through your mouth. Repeat several times. Imagine breathing in good, positive thoughts and exhaling those that are stale or negative.

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*Take a warm bath.* Dim the lights and light candles for a relaxing ambiance. Lather soap onto your feet and massage your entire foot in a circular motion from heel to toes. Then imagine you are rinsing stress and tension away.

*Practice progressive muscle relaxation.* Choose a specific muscle group. Tense the muscle tightly. Release and let the muscle relax. Clench and release again, and feel the relaxation deepen. Move to a new muscle group and repeat the process. Focus on the muscle groups where you tend to lock in your tension. Before going to sleep, while lying in bed, try beginning with your feet and working up the muscle groups in your body until you reach your head.

*Visualize a peaceful place.* Think about a relaxing place where you have been. Close your eyes and involve all of your senses as you focus on the scene. Imagine sights, sounds and smells.

*Stretch and Exercise.* Simple stretching exercises provide relief to tense muscles. All kinds of physical exercise help to reduce stress. Pick an exercise that you enjoy such as walking, gardening, dancing, running, or bicycling.

*Eat well.* Eat a well-balanced diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean protein. If you don't know how to begin changing your diet, consult with a dietician to develop a good plan that will work for you.

*Reduce caffeine.* Caffeine (in coffee, mocha drinks, black tea and chocolate) is a stimulant and can aggravate anxious, stressful feelings.

*Avoid alcohol.* Alcohol is a central nervous system depressant and not beneficial when you feel stressed or "down."

*Talk.* Expressing how you feel to a good listener, such as a counselor, clergy, trusted friend, mate, or even your pet can release stressful feelings. The listener may provide you with a new perspective or in listening to yourself talk, you may discover the answer was already within you.

*Laugh or Cry.* Both laughing and crying can be good emotional releases. Spend time with a friend who makes you laugh or read a book that is a tear-jerker, and get rid of pent-up stressful emotions.

*Pray or Meditate.* Both prayer and meditation may change the way you view a problem and can be beneficial methods of relaxation.

*Do what you love to do.* Engaging in a favorite activity either by yourself or with a friend will relax your emotions.

*Excessive stress can often be reduced by more effectively managing the time allotment each of us is given – 60 minutes each hour; 24 hours each day; 365 days each year.*

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### Time Management Techniques

- Identify your priorities. What people, activities or projects are most important to you? *Make sure your schedule is consistent with your priorities.*
- Don't add a new activity to your priority list unless you are able to subtract another.
- Evaluate activities regularly. Does the activity matter? Eliminate or delegate activities that no longer fit into your priorities.
- Determine the best time of your day. Do you find your greatest energy is in the morning, mid-day or late at night? Maximize that time by addressing your most challenging tasks during your peak time.
- Get organized. Find a method that works for you and use it. Replacing **piles** (of receipts and important papers) into **files** can save countless stress-filled hours.
- Eliminate clutter from your life. Cleaning off your desk, or organizing a closet can save precious time and energy.
- Take time to do what you enjoy doing by yourself or with others. Schedule fun times on your calendar. Consider these times important commitments.

### Maximize Quality Time at Home

- Get up a few minutes early so you can have some time to yourself.
- Prepare the night before. Set the breakfast table; prepare lunches; lay out clothes. Involve family members in this process.
- Maintain a large family calendar. Use a different color pen to enter individual family member's activities.
- Keep a portable file in the kitchen with clearly-marked folders for items you frequently need such as:
  - ✓ Petty cash envelope
  - ✓ Spare keys
  - ✓ Bank Deposit Slips
  - ✓ Babysitter Information
  - ✓ Health care information
- Take 15 minutes each evening to do a quick pick-up of the house. Turn off the television, put on some fun, high tempo music, set a timer and engage all family members in this activity.
- Hold weekly family meetings to discuss each other's schedules and listen to each other's concerns.
- Make a double recipe and freeze the extra for a quick-fix meal.

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### **Work-Related Stress**

No job is free from stress. All work brings responsibilities, problems, demands and pressures. Not all pressure is negative. We are often kept motivated by the challenges and difficulties we meet are able to solve at work. However, when the pressure is excessive it can become harmful.

*Levels of stress that become harmful are like to occur when there is:*

- Prolonged or increasing pressures occurring without relief.
- A sense of powerlessness over the demands being made.
- A series of conflicting demands without easy resolution.
- A continuous threat of violent or aggressive behavior with little or no defense.

*The following four areas may indicate work-related stress:*

#### **Performance at work**

- Decline in output or productivity; poor decision making
- Error rates increase; excessive misuse of time; deadlines not met.

#### **Employee morale**

- Decreased motivation and commitment.
- Increased work time does not lead to improve results.

#### **Relationships at work**

- A team spirit is difficult to maintain.
- Tension between colleagues increases and decisions become harder to reach.

#### **Sickness/absenteeism**

- Vague illnesses increase.
- Breaks from work increase.
- Late arrivals and early departures become more frequent.

*If you are concerned about work-related stress, remember the Employee Assistance Program is a CONFIDENTIAL service for employees, supervisors and managers.*

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### **Hints for Coping with Change and Stress**

*Do not take responsibility for everyone else's happiness.* Delegate or divide the work among those with whom you share your life. Don't rescue. If someone fails to carry out their part, let them find their own solutions and let them deal with the consequences. Don't take on the responsibility for other people's attitudes.

*Do not reinforce whining behavior.* Don't let someone else's stress become your stress.

*View any task you take on as a choice you have made.* Attitude makes a difference. "I choose to..." rather than "I have to..."

*Work at staying in the moment.* Don't worry about tomorrow's tasks today. Give positive attention to the tasks before you at the moment.

*Give yourself gifts.* Nurture yourself. Be a little selfish.

*Eliminate a sense of competition.* Life is not a contest.

*Do things with your family and friends that you all enjoy.* Don't pretend to be enthusiastic. Look for alternative activities that everyone will enjoy.

*Refuse to be lonely, even if you are alone.* You can choose what you think and experience. Again, nurture yourself. Remember that doing is an antidote for depression.

*Do not overspend.* Avoid setting yourself up for "future stress" when the bills come in.

*Avoid self-defeating habits.* You know those things that are harmful to your health and well-being. Do not overeat. Do not drink too much. Get enough rest.